Top Class Drama

Discussion Forum Transcript

Monday 20 April 2020  
With Chief Assessor Bronwyn Egan  
And performers Josh Connell, Sarah Bowers and Seamus Allan

**BRONWYN EGAN [BE]**

Welcome to Top Class Drama 2020, and this discussion with a few of our performers.

I’m Bronwyn Egan, and I’m the Chief Assessor for Drama. I’ll be moderating today’s discussion.

As we begin our discussion we acknowledge the traditional custodians of the land across which we currently meet, the people of the Kulin nations. We pay respects to Elders past, present and emerging.

Each year, Top Class concerts present some of the best work from VCE performing arts students, for the benefit of current students, teachers and the general public. In 2020, due to the disruptions of COVID-19, Top Class Drama and Theatre Studies were unfortunately unable to proceed as live concerts at Arts Centre Melbourne. And so, we’ve endeavoured to pull together an online version of these concerts. Performers have contributed self-taped videos of their solos, and in addition we’re hosting a series of conversations with performers about the process they went through to develop their work.

Before you listen to this conversation, I’d suggest watching the videos of the three solos from today’s forum discussion, available on the website so you have context for this conversation.

And now, I’ll ask the performers joining me today to introduce themselves.

**JOSHUA CONNELL [JC]**

Hi, I’m Joshua Connell. I went to Haileybury College, and I did the Colonel Mustard Stimulus.

**SARAH BOWERS [SB]**

Hi, I’m Sarah Bowers, I went to Brighton Grammar School and I did the Tina Sparkle and Ken Railings stimulus.

**SEAMUS ALLAN [SA]**

Hi, I’m Seamus Allan, I went to Catherine McAuley College in Bendigo and I did the Flower Thrower stimulus.

**[BE]**

Thanks everybody. To start, I’d like for you to discuss how you chose your character and when in the process you decided which character you were sticking with? Seamus we’ll start with you.

**[SA]**

Originally when we started looking at our stimulus our teacher asked us to think broadly, not to discount any straight away, to assess all the stimulus on their merits and start to whittle down from there. My top two picks were Colonel Mustard and The Flower Thrower. Whittling it down to two meant I was able to weigh up the pros and cons of both and how they would suit my performance style and how I’m able to write a solo. Then I found that with The Flower Thrower, epic theatre is a style that I really enjoy and do quite well, so that enabled me to try and gear my research towards the art and politics of The Flower Thrower. There was a lot of research that I could do with The Flower Thrower.

**[BE]**

Thank you. Sarah, what about you?

**[SB]**

As soon as I saw the Tina stimulus, I was like, ‘that’s the one’, I got so excited. But then I thought I might research into other ones a bit before I had my heart set on one. I looked into Tina, Juliet and Miss Scarlet. Ultimately I said, how can I play to my strengths? I love singing, musical theatre, dance, and I thought Tina would best show off my abilities in a solo, so I stuck with that.

**[BE]**

Great, thank you. Josh?

**[JC]**

I originally had two in mind – Toy Story and Colonel Mustard. Because I really love physical theatre, those were the two options that I thought would work best. When coming up with a lot of the things for my performance, I would choose different scenes that would work for both Toy Story and Colonel Mustard and which ones would either be funnier or follow the stimulus better, and that ended up being Colonel Mustard.

**[BE]**

You’ve all spoken a bit about research, that’s one of the new criteria with the new study design for Drama for last year. Can you tell me how you did your research or how much you did? Did you ever know you had done enough research? Sarah we might start with you on that one.

**[SB]**

I started with the materials given to us by VCAA and went through that a bunch of times, and then I watched *Strictly Ballroom* six times, and just took all the information I could and put it in a massive brainstorm. I also watched a bunch of ballroom dance competitions, actual ones on YouTube, behind the scenes of the movie of *Strictly Ballroom* so I could understand how the actors felt playing those characters. I think research was the most helpful thing in my solo, without it it would have been a completely different and not as fleshed out performance.

**[BE]**

Thank you. Josh what about you?

**[JC]**

Like Sarah said, I started off with all of the things that VCAA gave, which was a book called *Mysterious Circumstances* that essentially informed my whole piece. Because this solo was very historically based, I had to get the facts right when doing the scenes. I read the book, I also looked for a documentary about Richard Lancelyn Green that helped inform my piece.

**[BE]**

Seamus, how much research did you do?

**[SA]**

I ended up doing quite a lot of research just because of the nature of epic theatre and of the piece itself. It was a little bit daunting to start off with because The Flower Thrower presented the ideas and politics, which were both huge areas to look into. A lot of what my research was around was to try and find a focus. That was helped by what research was given in the solo structure, I started there, but then I directed my research towards political figures and I used a bit of verbatim theatre throughout my solo. Directing it towards those political figures helped me to focus my solo. I also developed dialogue that had one central focus and idea. Research was really the most helpful of the playmaking techniques for me in developing my solo.

**[BE]**

Thank you. One of the other changes in the new study design is that you get to choose your own dramatic element and convention from the list given. How did you go about choosing those, and when in the process did you choose which dramatic element and which convention you were going to use? Josh can we start with you?

**[JC]**

I would say about halfway through my initial scripting phase was when I thought that I would use the dramatic element of space. I transform my character from Colonel Mustard to The Detective to Richard Lancelyn Green, I thought it would be a good idea to utilise the space in an almost split-stage way, to use upstage as one character and downstage as the other. I thought I’d use big gestures to jump between each character and space really allowed me to do that in an efficient way.

For the convention I did do heightened language, I used a lot of poetry and rhyming words, and big vocabulary, to pay homage to Richard Lancelyn Green and Arthur Conan Doyle’s books.

**[BC]**

Thank you. Seamus what about you?

**[SA]**

Mine probably came about not in the most efficient way. I started developing my solo first and then applied a dramatic convention and dramatic element. I ended up using use of fact and rhythm. Obviously use of fact paired with the use of epic theatre quite well, so it was an easy choice to be directed that way, using my theatre style as a jumping point. But then I selected rhythm, also somewhat influenced by the theatre style because I was able to develop an episodic structure and use the idea of protest and marches and that kind of thing, as the trampoline to jump into rhythm as my dramatic element. So I worked first on developing a storyline and structure, and then used that to weave in a dramatic convention and dramatic element.

**[BE]**

And Sarah, was yours a similar process or something different?

**[SB]**

Kind of similar. Caricature jumped out straight away and I had it all set, just after watching the movie, I was like, ‘how can I not use caricature for this stimulus?’ When I got my set – I had three big boxes – I had no idea what I was going to do for dramatic element. I thought maybe I should use space, because I could move about the space, and I changed all of my blocking just to manipulate the space as much as I could. I was jumping on and off the boxes, I was moving them around, I was dancing between them as if they were other performers. I realised which to do at very different times, but I don’t think it matters that it came later.

**[BE]**

You mention your props Sarah. How did everyone choose and come to stick to the props and sets that you had for your performance. Sarah?

**[SB]**

I wanted to highlight winning and losing, because the two characters Tina and Ken just want to win in life and they’re about to win this competition that I had them in. I thought I’d make a podium out of these boxes and then I thought I’d have separate boxes and at the end bring them together. So I was like, ‘okay, I’ve got my set, do I need a prop?’ Before this year’s study design it was transformation of object. I thought I don’t really need it, because it would take away from what I could do just using mime and transformation of character and place and time. I just had the three boxes and I moved them as many times as I could…pretty fun!

**[BE]**

Seamus, what about you?

**[SA]**

I ended up being quite lucky that transformation of object was taken out this year because I had no idea what prop I wanted to use or how I could transform it. My production areas as a whole linked in directly with The Flower Thrower motif. My costume was the costume that The Flower Thrower motif wore, and I held the flowers that he held. The main vehicle through which I applied symbol was my production areas and my setpiece. My setpiece was this big black box. Because of epic theatre being my theatre style I used signs and placards on each of the sides with the year, the location and symbols related to political themes – like the anarchy symbol, a grenade, various spray-painted things on the sides. As I moved that box around, it allowed me to transform place and time. It ticked a lot of boxes for me at the same time, because it allowed me to apply symbol, transform place, transform time, while still keeping in with my theatre style. Trying to develop a setpiece that is able to be manipulated easily and is able to tick a lot of boxes is really helpful, and was helpful for me in developing my solo.

**[BE]**

Thank you. Josh, what about you.

**[JC]**

I chose my props and designed my props in a way that allowed it to show off a lot of symbolic aspects and allow my character to transform place, time and character. I had a doorframe that spun on a rotating axis, which easily allowed me to go through, come out as a new character, or go through, come out in a different time, and jump back and forth. My other prop was a box which I painted like a dice. All of those aspects had bits that related to mysteries or murder mysteries. The dice was obviously related to Cluedo, the game. The door had a big question mark on the back, and the outline of a human corpse that I would constantly position my body in as a way to foreshadow and symbolise the inevitability of death.

**[BE]**

And that’s described the application of symbol that you’ve all used as well. Sarah, you also chose to use a soundtrack. Why did you choose to use a soundtrack, was that from the start, how did you develop that, were there any pitfalls with it?

**[SB]**

I spent so long on my soundtrack, hours. From the start I really liked the idea of including heaps of music theatre references, highlighting style, using song and instrumental. I took different songs I thought would fit in with my storyline, grabbed the instrumental music, and then used sound effects to accent different parts of my solo. I found it was so helpful in keeping me in time, a lot of my friends were struggling to keep their solo under 6 minutes or under how long they needed to. It kept me stuck to my rhythm and stuck to my transformation of time and place. It helped my solo flow really seamlessly.

**[BE]**

Josh, you added physical comedy to your structure even though it was just eclectic. Why did you choose to add the physical comedy?

**[JC]**

I love physical theatre. It’s one of my strengths. Whenever I was to perform anything I would try as hard as I could to put physical theatre into my performance. So when the opportunity came to [inaudible] for Colonel Mustard, I said this is my time and I put everything I could into physical theatre. Last year when I did Theatre Studies, my performance was physical theatre, so I thought to, not push myself, but do something that I love. It really helped me inform my character and all of the scenes within my piece. [inaudible] That’s what I really enjoy, and that’s why I put it in.

**[BE]**

Can each of you give me an example of a problem or a roadblock that you might have encountered as you were developing your solos? Seamus can we start with you.

**[SA]**

What I found with my solo is it’s very easy to get into the habit of rehearsing scenes that you’ve already done and rehearsing scenes that you know because that’s what you’re confident with. From there, it’s really hard to try and get motivated to write some more and not just rest with you’re already stuck with. Sometimes – it’s not the best way to work – but sometimes I’d go a week or two of my production period of trying to make my solo where I’d just have the same section of my solo that I was working on. And that’s fine if you’re perfecting it and you’re making sure that it’s all good, but after two weeks it was more just that that was where I was comfortable and I didn’t know where to go next. I found that sitting back and making sure that I had a very distinct structure in my solo that I was able to stick to and develop a script from there, that’s how I like to work from the start, to try and develop a very specific episodic structure and like, okay, I can work on this contained bit of dialogue, I can work on this contained bit of dialogue, and then I can add them together after that. You just have to try and put things down on paper, because you never know what’s going to stick. Sometimes the things that stick aren’t things that you thought would work or be funny, but just by putting that down on paper you can get the ball rolling in your head, and even if you throw it out immediately you’ve already got started on something new, so you can keep developing your solo.

**[BE]**

Thank you. What about you Josh, any problems or roadblocks?

**[JC]**

The first few weeks where we got the stimulus and we’d chosen our stimulus, I got in the mindset that for a whodunit, it had to have twists and turns, and red herrings, and distractions, everything in that ballpark, everything under the sun to do with whodunits. I fell into the trap of getting too much in my head and trying to write a story that went back and forth and have convoluted twists and everything like that. After a few weeks I ended up having one or two scenes done, with no clear storyline to go through. It was very difficult to understand. Eventually my teacher pretty much slapped it into me that it didn’t have to be so confusing or complicated, it could just be one straightforward storyline with a twist ended. That made me scrap everything that I had, and then rewrite the scenes that I liked. It’s all for the best.

**[BE]**

Thank you, and Sarah what about you, any problems or roadblocks along the way?

**[SB]**

I had a few roadblocks! In year 11 and 12 I actually struggled starting. I spent three weeks twiddling my thumbs, thinking, ‘I’ve seen Top Class, they’re all amazing, I’m never going to get that good, I don’t know how I actually do that.’ I was freaking out but then I actually started getting things on the page and I was getting more confident with it. But then three weeks before my performance exam I said, ‘this is not happening, I’m not doing this solo, it’s not going in that room’. So I locked myself in a room and fully rewrote the performance over a week and then I ended up with something I was really proud of and really happy with! I’m actually glad I had that crisis three weeks before, because it would have been a completely different performance if I didn’t.

**[BE]**

And finally, what advice would you all give any other students attempting this task for this year. Josh, we’ll start with you.

**[JC]**

I would say, one, play to your strengths; and two, challenge yourself. And they’re both…that’s a contradicting statement. But if you stick to something that you know and that you can confidently do well; and then put aspects of things into what you do that challenge the way that you do things, you’ll learn new things. But most importantly just have fun with everything. If it’s something that you’re happy with and you’re proud of, then everyone else will see that you’re having a good time and that it’s something you put your heart and soul into, and they’ll appreciate the work.

**[BE]**

And Sarah, what about you – any advice to students for this year?

**[SB]**

Enjoy making it! I think we’re so lucky to be able to put everything in it, our own work, and we get to present it at the end. And use your friends in class. One of my best ideas came from ideas bouncing off my friends before or after class, and I’d have to go write it down really quickly. Also research as much as you can, not just at the start but throughout the process. I watched a lot of *Kath and Kim*, because I based a lot of Tina off Kim. If you get lots of different quirks from different characters in your life or on TV you can add them to your own character, it makes it a lot better.

**[BE]**

Thank you. And, Seamus what about you? Any advice to students this year?

**[SA]**

My advice would be to start with breadth, try and do a lot of things and investigate a lot of things and try a lot of things and then focus from there, because it’s far easier to focus from breadth than it is to make a concrete storyline from the start. So if you start with a wide research base and you start with brainstorming everything you can think of and trying different things then it’s far easier to refine it down into a well-rounded final product, because you have a variety of different opinions and influences in your solo.

And also, utilise the resources around you. My Drama teacher would check in with us every single session, check how we’re going, she would allow us to bounce ideas off her. Use your teachers. I used my Art teacher to help me create my setpiece. They’re there for a reason, they’re not just there to try and keep you to a schedule, they’re very knowledgeable and know what they’re doing. So make sure you use them to your advantage when you’re creating your solo.

**[BE]**

Good advice from all of you.

So thanks for listening to this discussion with Josh, Seamus and Sarah. We hope it’s given you some useful insights into the process and work involved in developing an outstanding Drama solo. For those of you undertaking VCE Drama this year, we wish you well working on this creative and rewarding task, and acknowledge the added challenges you’re likely to face given the context in which you’re studying and creating.

Good luck.